

Fundamentalism, Liberalism and Indian Muslims

Book *India's Muslim Spring - Why is Nobody Talking about It?*

Author: Hasan Suroor's

Publisher: Rupa Publications, New Delhi, 2014.

ABHAY KUMAR

Hasan Suroor is a London-based veteran journalist. He began his career with *The Statesman* and later he worked as *The Hindu's* UK correspondent for over a decade. He continues to write in newspapers on important issues such as Muslim identity, secularism, communalism and Islam. He was brought up and educated in Delhi after his family left Lucknow for the national capital post-Partition. Their new destination, at least in the beginning, did not receive its guests warmly as his parents' identity as Muslim worked as a hurdle for them to rent a flat in New Delhi. Eventually they had to seek refuge in the Muslim-majority Ballimaran of the Walled City where his mother worked as a Communist Party activist.

Suroor, who is regarded as one of the "progressive" and "liberal" voices among Muslims, has recently been in news for an interesting thesis which he offers in his new book, *India's Muslim Spring: Why is Nobody Talking about It?*

He argues that for the first time since Independence a "seismic" and "tectonic" shift has taken place in the Indian Muslim community with an emergence of "liberal spring" among the new generation Muslims, who were born after the late 1970s.

For Suroor, the elder generations of Muslims were "fundamentalist" and "emotional", "intolerant" of freedom of speech, prioritized "cultural" and "identity" issues over substantive ones, had "contempt" for women and blamed others for the plight of Muslim community while the young Muslims are just the opposite of their elders — they are "tolerant", "pragmatic", "moderates", "secular", "cosmopolitan", "optimistic", "confident" and "forward-looking" as well as "nationalistic". In short, he creates a binary between the fundamentalist old Muslims versus liberal young Muslims.

Notwithstanding his argument that these young Muslims are secular, liberal and modern, Suroor at the same time, in the book, depicts them as deeply religious as these young Muslims greet each other with salaam alaikum instead of more secular aadab, dutifully offer namaz, keep fast, grow beard, avoid haram meat and so on. Does not he contradict himself by saying that the new generations of Muslims are, at the same time, both deeply religious and secular? He would strongly argue that the new generations of Muslims have been able to reconcile these contradictory values. For him, the appearance of religiosity and the rise of Muslim consciousness among young Muslims are reactions to Islamophobia post- 9/11 and the fact that they wear their religiosity on their sleeves does not come in the way of their being liberal and moderate Muslims.

In the words of Suroor, "the younger generation of Muslims is more inclusive, more cosmopolitan and more forward-looking than their parents' generation was. Don't judge them by their beards and hijabs. Go and talk to them, which is what I did, and you might be surprised, as I was, to discover how well-adjusted, optimistic and nationalistic today's Indian Muslim youth is" (p. xii).

To recap, he contends that for the first time since 1947 there has been an arrival of "Muslim spring" amid "religious fervour" as the moderate sections of Muslims, argues Suroor, are now in a position to dominate fundamentalist forces.

In what follows I shall examine his claim and argue that his generalisation of the Muslim spring is not empirically sustainable. Besides, I will also problematize some of his views about the Muslim community.

A Critique of "Muslim Spring" Thesis: As mentioned above, his thesis of the Muslim spring is based on an untenable binary of fundamentalist old generations of Muslims versus liberal and new generations of Muslims. The author does not provide sufficient empirical materials to convince readers that the old generations of Muslims were indeed fundamentalists. However, my interest lies in understanding why does a well-informed journalist like Suroor often walks that the early generations of Muslims were not liberal? One plausible answer may be found in the works of anthropologist Talal Asad, whose book "Formation of the Secular" (2003) gives a critical insight to recognise the violence of secularism. Asad shows how a secularist — such as Suroor in India — operates within the notion of linear progress of time from a tradi-

...an interviewee of Suroor claims that India is "the safest and best place for Muslims" in the world. The politics of such a statement is that it silences the cries of millions of Muslims who are victims of post-Independence communal violence.

tional, religious and communitarian self into an individuated, autonomous, rational, secular and moral self. Thus the secularist Suroor is deeply uncomfortable with "Muslim" organisations, "self-styled" communitarian leaders and ulama (religious leaders) and he, therefore, does not miss any chance to bash mullas by projecting them as villains!

Even if Suroor likes or dislikes, it is a fact that the hold of these Muslim organisations and communitarian leaders, whom Suroor calls fundamentalists, seems much stronger in the Muslim community than a secularist like him is willing to recognise.

I think Suroor would have done much more relevant work had he instead studied how these organisations and communitarian and religious leaders enjoy so much support among the Muslim community.

Having lamented that the old generations were conservative and fundamentalist, Suroor suddenly begins to celebrate the flowering of the liberal spring among young Muslims. But his claim lacks empirical evidence. As he himself points out that Muslims are not a monolithic community and the community is sharply divided on class, caste, sect, and regional lines — how could he then base his thesis on just a few interviews?

As he mentions that his method is based on "good old-fashioned journalism" in which he appears to have interacted with a dozen of urban middle class Muslims mostly in Lucknow, Aligarh, Meerut and Delhi. Among his interviewees are a businessman, a hotel executive, a young theatre actor, a car dealer, a young Muslim graphic designer, a mass-communication student etc. Are they representatives of around 20 crore Muslims of India? The persons whom Suroor interviews come from a well-off social background and their views are likely to be articulated from their locations.

Therefore, Suroor commits an error to equate their views with the views of the entire community. He also fails to critically evaluate the statements of his interviewees. Further, Suroor ends up propagating some highly problematic assumptions and suggestions about the Muslims community, which often come through his interviewees. Let me begin with one such interviewee who ends up supporting free-market economy.

First, Razia Siddiqui, 28, who works with a multinational corporation, completely dismisses the idea that market excludes a large section of people. Instead, she gives an argument based on meritocracy. "Post-globalization, opportunities have increased manifold. Institutions only look for the right attitude and sincerity in individuals. I have never come across a meritorious and diligent Muslim who has not progressed. It is not a case of discrimination; it is a case of working hard, working diligently, and keeping oneself away from negative thoughts of all kinds. Unfortunately, Muslims have remained so archaic in their approach that they become a case of missed opportunities" (p. 138.).

At another place Siddiqui cites the life of nuclear scientist and former President of India Dr APJ Abdul Kalam as a role model who has reached the top from a modest background. However, the problem with such a formulation is that it reduces poverty to an individual level and overlooks the fact of inbuilt unequal social relations.

Similarly, Suroor, despite his inclination towards the Left, celebrates the last two decades of growth in India, arguing that there has been a high expansion of higher education for Muslims women but he overlooks the fact that the State, as argued by Marxist political economists, has also rolled back in this period and there has been a massive cut of expenditure on social sectors. At times, he seems to contradict himself when he mentions that Muslims are facing discrimination but his overall argument appears to have been informed by limited set of data. As the Sachar Committee and the Mishra Commission have shown, Muslims of India, with their internal variations, are socially and economically a backward community. Therefore, they need urgent ameliorative policies from State but Suroor's celebrated young liberal Muslims instead solely blame individuals for the plight of the

community.

Second, at another place, an interviewee of Suroor claims that India is "the safest and best place for Muslims" in the world. The politics of such a statement is that it silences the cries of millions of Muslims who are victims of post-Independence communal violence. For example, in recent times, within a hundred kilometers from the national capital New Delhi, as many as 50 thousands Muslims remain displaced in the wake of Muzaffarnagar communal violence last September. Nine months after the violence, many of them are still living in relief camps amid the reign of social terror. Had Suroor visited these camps and interviewed them about whether India was the safest place to live for Muslims, the answer would have been quite different. His claim that young Muslims are well integrated in the mainstream, stands questioned as thousands of young boys and girls, who have been living in these camps, remain uprooted from society.

Third, Suroor argues that the young Muslims, unlike their elders, are pragmatic. But what does this pragmatism mean? On one occasion, Suroor seems to suggest that pragmatism for Muslims means their willingness to support and vote for BJP/Modi! He, therefore, offers Muslims a suggestion, "if voting BJP in special circumstances was in their interest, vote BJP." I think this is a very problematic advice. Suroor, who has written against communalism for decades, seems to argue in favour of compromising with it. He may call a Muslim supporter of Modi pragmatic but millions others, who are waging a relentless struggle against communal-fascism, would beg to differ with him.

Fourth, Suroor seems to agree with the views of a Meerut businessman and a Jamia Millia Islamia student who talk about the neglect of education on the part of Muslim community and the need to take a leaf from another minority community's book, Parsis.

While his emphasis on the need to have a self-introspection among the Muslim community is welcome, my differences with Suroor lie in his equating the issues Muslims with those of Parsis. Needless to say, history and social and economical conditions of Parsis and Muslims are quite different. Muslims, much more than Parsis, encounter anti-Muslim prejudices in society in their everyday life. And unlike Parsis, Muslims have been victims of many State-sponsored riots since Independence.

Fifth, the secularist Suroor, who is burdened with the ideology of "secular nationalism", does not give an impartial account of history too. While discussing the history of Partition, he is overtly critical of the Muslim League and Jinnah while he is completely silent about the role of the Congress. Though he is right to point the finger at the role of elite sections of Muslims who saw the creation of Pakistan as beneficial for serving their own interests, he does not even mention in passing the failures of the Indian National Congress. Historians have rightly shown that the Congress, which had powerful Hindu communalists, masquerading as nationalists within its fold, was not willing to accommodate the legitimate demands of Muslims, paving the way for Partition.

Besides my disagreement with some of his basic arguments, Suroor also makes some factual errors in the book. I was surprised to find that a writer on the Muslim issue and Islam was not able to write the correct meaning of salaam alaikum, which is peace/blessing be upon you, not "God is great" as he says (p. xi).

Contrary to Suroor's assumptions and views, Muslims, particularly the youth, continue to face a serious problem of unemployment and discrimination at the hands of State and society. The account of Suroor fails to sufficiently capture the growing frustration of Muslim youths. Instead of locating Muslim youths' participations in various struggles for wages, employments, dignity and civil rights, Suroor sticks them with his pet labels ("liberal", "nationalistic" and "well-integrated").

My critique of Suroor's labels does not mean that Muslims are just the opposite of what he argues, i.e., fundamentalists or anti-nationalists. What I mean is that Suroor's thesis of the Muslim spring is not attentive to capturing the complexities of contemporary Muslim lives. (Kafila.org)

Abhay Kumar is pursuing PhD at Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. He can be reached at debatingissues@gmail.com

Know the RSS with this
7th Revised and enlarged Edition
RSS Primer
Based on Rashtriya
Swayamsevak Sangh

Guekwad Haveli where he was interrogated

ing state machinery against a particular community and demanded that other such